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THE OCTOPUS MOTIVE IN ANCIENT CHIRIQUIAN ART

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The ancient art of the one small province of Chiriqui in the diminutive Republic of Panama is perhaps better known than that of any region of like size in the New World. The material for study is abundant, consisting largely of ceramic products, both painted and unpainted. These have become more or less familiar to students of archeology through two large monographs, one by Professor W. H. Holmes<sup>1</sup> and the other by myself.<sup>2</sup>

It was found that the pottery could be readily divided into about a dozen rather distinct groups, depending largely on the nature of the paste and other materials used as well as the method of producing the dominant decorative features. For example, symbolism and ornament in the unpainted ware find expression in plastic forms and incised patterns. Both are traceable to zoömorphic originals, as are the plastic and painted motives in the painted ware. The motive may represent the entire animal in fairly realistic fashion or it may consist of almost any part of the animal, as for example the head, foot, tail, eye, appendage, or some characteristic body marking. Certain animal motives are always represented in the round or in relief; others appear only as incised patterns and still others predominantly as painted forms.

Thus we find the plastic armadillo dominating the great group that might appropriately bear that name; the incised serpent goes with a distinctive group of black ware; the plastic fish in the guise of tripod supports runs through another group; while the painted alligator is supreme in two closely related groups of painted ware.

One soon learns by experience to associate a given motive with a given paste, slip, quality of modeling, and the character and number of the

colors employed, as well as the method of their application. After the armadillo ware, perhaps the largest group is the one to which Holmes gave the name *lost color* ware, the designs being produced by the removal of color rather than by its direct application. In addition to the process of negative painting employed, this group is also characterized by distinctive forms as well as the nature of the paste and the colors, also the degree of finish (or absence of it) to which the modeling was carried.

In the lost color ware a majority of the designs consists of rhomboidal figures, triangles, associated bands composed of groups of straight lines, and designs in the shape of fronds and waving arms. They are found alone as well as in combination. The fronds, waving arms, triangles, and straight bars, as well as the lozenge-shaped designs are often associated with series of dots. What is the meaning of all this? At first glance they seem far removed from the motives derived from animal forms so characteristic of other groups of Chiriquian pottery. Could they be plant derivatives? Are they perhaps simply the products of uncontrolled fancy?

A key to the mystery recently came to light in the shape of a more realistic rendering of the motive than had been known hitherto. It consisted of a lozenge-shaped body to which was attached eight waving arms. It filled a circular panel on the two sides of a round-bodied lost color vase collected by Mr. George G. Heye while on a trip to Chiriqui in 1913. This vase to which Professor Marshall H. Saville had called my attention was recently published by me.<sup>3</sup> The design represents an octopus (fig. 1). At that time, I pointed out its kinship to many designs previously published by Holmes and myself, but the significance of which had not been understood.

A further study tends not only to confirm what was said in my last note but also to emphasize the importance of this newly discovered motive as a special feature of lost-color symbolism in ancient Chiriquian art, and as another example of how a whole group of related motives in primitive art may be traced to a single zoömorphic prototype.

Recently in going over some duplicate Chiriquian pottery with a view to making an exchange, I came across several new variations of the octopus motive. In one shapely vase the eight octopus appendages are evenly distributed over the upper zone, being attached to a line just below the neck of the vessel (fig. 2). The neck and aperture thus take the place of the octopus body and mouth. The artist's point of view can perhaps be better appreciated by looking down on the vase from above rather than by a side view.

A similar idea but expressed in a different way is shown in figure

3 (fig. 167 of Holmes's monograph). Here the arms are attached to the equatorial zone (or slightly lower) and rise like short-based triangles to the neck of the vase. They are dotted to represent the succers. In looking down upon this vase the arms converge toward the narrow neck of the vessel, which thus becomes the mouth opening of the octopus. The body of the vase therefore becomes the body of the octopus, which is represented not only in painted design but also in the round.

Thus the octopus appendage may be represented in two ways; as a frond-like arm or as a short-based triangle. Each type is often (but not always) accompanied by dots representing the succers. Both types are seen in figure 4. Four of one kind alternate with four of the other kind converging toward the neck of a small globular vase with black ground and cream pattern. The four fronds are straight, each consisting of two lines enclosing a row of dots. Each triangular arm is set in a series of paired converging lines the outer ones being accompanied by succer dots. An identical octopus design is repeated on the lower half of the vase, beginning midway and with the eight arms converging toward a central point on the bottom.

Akin to all the foregoing is an octopus motive produced by shifting



FIG. 1.—OCTOPUS MOTIVE AS A CIRCULAR PANEL DECORATION. HEYE COLLECTION. CAT. NO. 351.



FIG. 2.—OCTOPUS MOTIVE, THE EIGHT APPENDAGES FORMING THE SHOULDER DECORATION, THE NECK OF THE VASE REPRESENTS THE OCTOPUS BODY. YALE COLLECTION.

the mouth opening from the neck of the vase to an equatorial point on the side of the body and representing it by means of a painted circle. In order to eliminate as it were the neck and aperture of the vase from consideration, a large circular panel is formed about this make-believe mouth opening as a center. The eight arms converging from the periphery of the panel toward the central mouth opening produce the same effect as though one were looking down on the vase in figure 3. This gives the design that in earlier publications was called the rosette. It is simply a variety of the octopus motive and is met with perhaps oftener than any other single variety. In order the more easily to arrive at a circular panel, the body of the vessel was made spherical and



FIG. 3.—OCTOPUS MOTIVE. THE SUCCERED ARMS RISE LIKE SHORT-BASED TRIANGLES TOWARD THE NECK OF THE VASE WHICH SERVES AS THE OCTOPUS BODY. FROM HOLMES.



FIG. 4.—TWO VARIETIES OF THE OCTOPUS APPENDAGE MOTIVE. FOUR ARMS OF EACH KIND RISE TOWARD THE NECK OF THE VASE; THIS DESIGN IS REPEATED ON THE LOWER HALF OF THE VASE. HEYE COLLECTION. CAT. NO 7461.

the neck small, two characters common to lost color vases. It is therefore probable that the exigencies of the design tended to control the shape of the vessel, and vice versa. A good example just rescued from the duplicate material in the Yale Museum is reproduced in figure 5.

Referring back to the key specimen (see fig. 1), we find the octopus body represented by a rhomboidal or lozenge-shaped figure. In some realistic examples showing appendages attached to the body, the dots representing succers are placed within the field of the body rather than on the appendages. Remembering the freedom with which the ancient Chiriquian artist suppressed or transposed parts, one would expect to find cases where the body is represented and the appendages omitted. This would give an octopus body motive. The body motive, as was the case with appendage motives, is repeated to form zonal or other

ornaments (fig. 6). As might be expected, it is not limited to the lozenge form. Any four-sided, perhaps even rounded or triangular design would answer the symbolic requirements, especially if it contained dots to suggest succers and, by inference, the appendages on which they grow.

With such an exuberant proliferation of motives derived from a single zoömorphic original, there is of course ever present the possibility of the overlapping of motives that started from wholly different originals. I have already referred to the occurrence of the dorsal-view motive of the alligator on lost color ware (*Op. cit.*). It is highly probable that the overlapping of this motive (perhaps also the scale-group and spine

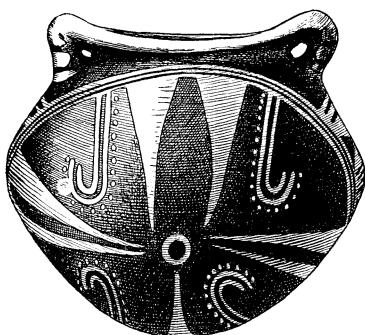


FIG. 5.—OCTOPUS MOTIVE. THE TWO KINDS OF APPENDAGES CONVERGE TOWARD THE CENTER OF A CIRCULAR PANEL. YALE COLLECTION.  $\frac{1}{2}$ .



FIG. 6.—ZONAL DECORATION CONSISTING OF THE OCTOPUS BODY MOTIVE ENCLOSING SUCCER DOTS. YALE COLLECTION.  $\frac{1}{2}$ .

motive) and the one derived from the succers and appendages of the octopus has taken place to some extent, due to the convergence toward a common type, of scale-spine symbols of the alligator on the one hand and appendage-succer symbols of the octopus on the other. In so far as ancient Chiriquian art may serve as a guide, however, such overlappings instead of accounting for the evolution of the various motive groups, are rather to be considered as exceptions that prove the rule.

<sup>1</sup>Ancient art of the province of Chiriqui, *Smithsonian Inst., Rep. Bur. Amer. Eth.* 6 (1888).

<sup>2</sup>A study of Chiriquian antiquities, *Mem. Conn. Acad. Arts Sci.*, 3 (1911).

<sup>3</sup>Note on the archeology of Chiriqui, *Amer. Anthropol.*, N. S., 15, 661-667 (1913).